

Montebello History

Just south of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary boundary are the remains of the oil tanker *Montebello*. Built in 1921 at the Southwestern Shipbuilding Company in San Pedro California, the shelter deck tanker had an overall length of 457 feet (139 meters). The Union Oil tanker's career carrying petroleum products was for the most part uneventful, making regular runs to ports like the Hawaiian Islands, Siberia, British Columbia and other ports in the Pacific. On December 22, 1941, *Montebello* loaded a cargo of 73,571 barrels (3,089,982 gallons) of Santa Marina crude oil at the Union Oil Company's facility in Port San Luis, California. The crude oil was so thick it had to be heated before it could be loaded into the vessel's nine liquid product cargo tanks. The destination of the cargo of oil was Vancouver, British Columbia.

With the outbreak of World War II just three weeks earlier, there were reports of Japanese submarines attacking merchant ships along the California coast. On December 23rd at 1:30 a.m., the tanker now loaded with the cargo of oil and sitting low in the water, cleared Port San Luis breakwater proceeding on a northbound course. At around 3:30 a.m. the crew was called to station and ordered to put on life jackets, the ship was notified that the tanker *Larry Doheny* had been fired upon north of their location. Ordinary seamen Richard Quincy, then twenty-two years of age, recalled the events of the early morning. At 5:00 a.m. it was still dark, the *Montebello*'s lights were blacked out and the vessel's position was nearing Piedras Blancas Point. About a half-hour later, Quincy was on watch and could make out an object on the water running in the tanker's wake and discounted it for a northbound coastal vessel. As the rising sun silhouetted the trailing vessel off the port quarter, Quincy realized it was a Japanese submarine low in the water. The *I-21* then repositioned to the starboard quarter between the tanker and mainland and fired a single torpedo into the *Montebello*. At 5:55 the Captain gave the order to abandoned ship, all thirty-eight crewmen left the tanker in four lifeboats as the *I-21* opened fired on the boats with its deck gun.

The lifeboats finally pulled away safely from the tanker as the submarine descended below the surface to avoid detection from responding aircraft. The crew watched the tanker settle in the bow, submerging below the surface at 6:45 a.m. As the bow started downward, the crew witnessed the stern clearing the ocean surface by 150 feet (45 meters). They concluded the tanker was struck amidships around the No. 3 tank, but couldn't understand why the cargo, with a Grade A Flash point at room temperature, why the oil did not ignite? The crew speculated the torpedo struck between decks above the oil storage tanks.

Montebello Reconnaissance

The *Montebello* was largely forgotten with the exception of local fisherman who found the site to be a productive fishing spot. It was not until members of the Central Coast Maritime Museum Association considered nominating the shipwreck to the National Register to properly memorialize the historic event. Further, there was the growing concern whether the shipwreck still contained its toxic cargo of crude oil potentially

threatening the nearby waters of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. A proposal to investigate the site of the *Montebello* and document the integrity of its hull was submitted to NOAA's West Coast National Undersea Research Center. NOAA agreed to fund the investigation utilizing Delta Oceanographics' submersible, *Delta*, which is capable of working at depths up to 1200 feet (365 meters). Archaeologist Jack Hunter, President of the Central Coast Maritime Museum Association, was the project director and principal investigator.

On November 7, 1996, working aboard the research vessel *Cavalier*, the science team included archaeologists, historians, and biologists. Utilizing a Furuno depth finder, a large target was located in approximately 850 feet (259 meters) of water. *Delta* was launched off the *Cavalier* and navigated towards the target site. Radio communications from *Delta* confirmed a large shipwreck had been located at a depth of nearly 900 feet (274 meters) and that the submersible would ascend up to the main deck to confirm the identity. It was discovered that the shipwreck was covered in fishing nets, and the pipe configuration on main deck confirmed the vessel was a tanker. This dive was the first direct observation of the tanker since the historic event of being torpedoed by the Japanese Imperial Navy in California waters 55 years earlier.

Three additional *Delta* dives were made to the *Montebello*, with a total of fourteen full circumnavigations of the site recording the condition of the tanker through still photography and videotape footage. Observations made during the four dives concluded the hull was remarkably intact and resting on an even keel on the ocean floor. The bow had become detached separating just forward of the foremast where twisted metal indicated the torpedo impact zone. It was not until the end of the fourth reconnaissance dive that the bow section was located. It was discovered that the cutwater was buried in the sand some yards ahead of the main hull, with the aftermost part of the bow rising above the sea floor at a 40-degree angle with a slight list to port.

Based on this observation, it was determined that during the sinking, *Montebello* hit the ocean floor with enough force to drive the bow deep into the bottom sediment, separating at the torpedo impact zone. The aft 90 percent of the hull then recoiled back and settled squarely in its keel. More importantly the investigation concluded that the torpedo had not penetrated the region of the tanker's oil cargo storage holds as reported by the *Montebello*'s crew, but actually struck forward in the pump room and dry storage cargo hold. It is the opinion of principle investigator Jack Hunter that the *Montebello*'s cargo of Santa Maria crude oil is still entombed in the tanker. During the four videotaped reconnaissance dives in 1996, there were no observations of oil being introduced into the water column. Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary is developing plans for another reconnaissance expedition to the *Montebello* site in the near future. One of the goals for the mission is to continue monitoring the hull's integrity and note any changes since the 1996 investigation.